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91 Days

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91 DAYS

by

CANDICE GREATHOUSE

Under the Direction of Nancy Floyd

ABSTRACT

91 Days is a multi-channel video installation composed over a period of ninety-one days, and comprised of thousands of photographs. The photographs create a visual archive of the daily experiences of the home. The corresponding text discusses the link between privacy and self-representation, specifically in relation to the family album.

INDEX WORDS: Archive, Privacy, Self-representation, Family album

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CANDICE GREATHOUSE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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Georgia State University

May 2012

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my partner Trace Taylor, and my son Dorian, without their love, support, and understanding, this project would not exist.

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This paper would not have been possible without the extraordinary support of my family and guidance of my thesis committee. Thank you to my thesis committee members: Nancy Floyd, Constance Thalken, and Dr. Maria Gindhart for your creative expertise and mentorship. Additionally, I would like to thank Christina Price Washington for being my constant advisor and friend, in both art and life.

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PROLOGUE

It is dark inside. A smattering of rays peek through window cracks. One room is illuminated by a nightlight, which bathes the space in a multicolored glow. A child tosses and turns throughout the night. The morning light hints and the family wakes, except the woman, who sleeps on. In the semidarkness, the child and man appear and then are gone, soon the man returns. He claims his place on the couch, remote in hand. One image appears; another disappears. The clock moves, breaking the hour into fractions. The man moves to the computer, then back to the couch. The woman sleeps on. She is now up, coffee is made and so is the bed. The day continues, the child reappears. The woman is no longer there. The man and the child are watching something beyond the frame. On and off they play, and then the child is in bed. The sun sets, illuminating the rooms with a warm light. The man returns to the couch for some time, and then the woman arrives and joins him. They move themselves to another room, now in front of a computer screen. The lights go off and it is night again. The next day comes, the day repeats. Some things change, but most things remain the same.

1 INTRODUCTION

91 Days is a multi-channel video installation featuring large-scale photographic projections and is the result of an ongoing fascination with the idea and meaning of family. It is a visual document of my family in our home for three months, from October 9th, 2011 through January 8th, 2012. Five cameras were installed in five rooms of our home, and simultaneous photographs were made every fifteen minutes during this period of time. I use the word document, not diary, for a diary would necessitate a more personal, intimate, subjective recording to be made than what these images allow. The photographs of *91 Days* are objective, aiming for an honest and truthful account of my home life. This visual archive seeks to reconstruct the daily experiences of the home spatially, while addressing the link between privacy and self-representation, specifically in relation to the family album.

My body of work engages the binary of public versus private. This binary is inevitable since most things, places, and moments are one or the other, public or private. The photographs of *91 Days* are taken from an intimate domestic setting where private happenings are now made public. This work exists in the in-between area, as does the concept of family. Family is both public and private, simultaneously. This work asks the viewer to look at family differently, to acknowledge the inherent contradictions that create and shape family. The typical family discourse as portrayed in mass media is generic and unrealistic, and my work provides a visual space that allows the viewer to be physically immersed in a way that introduces a new perspective. My work is a quiet celebration of the embarrassing, the mundane, and the boring aspects of family life, which constitute a significant part of the familial experience.



Figure 1

Compilation of rooms from *91 Days*, 2011-2012

2 TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *91 Days* of the title is the period of time that I documented my family. This is an arbitrary number - three months, a season, and a quarter of a year. This work addresses the reality or realness of my family life by employing an objective design. With five cameras installed in locations that encompass major areas of each room (Figure 2), the focal point of each room's activity is always captured.

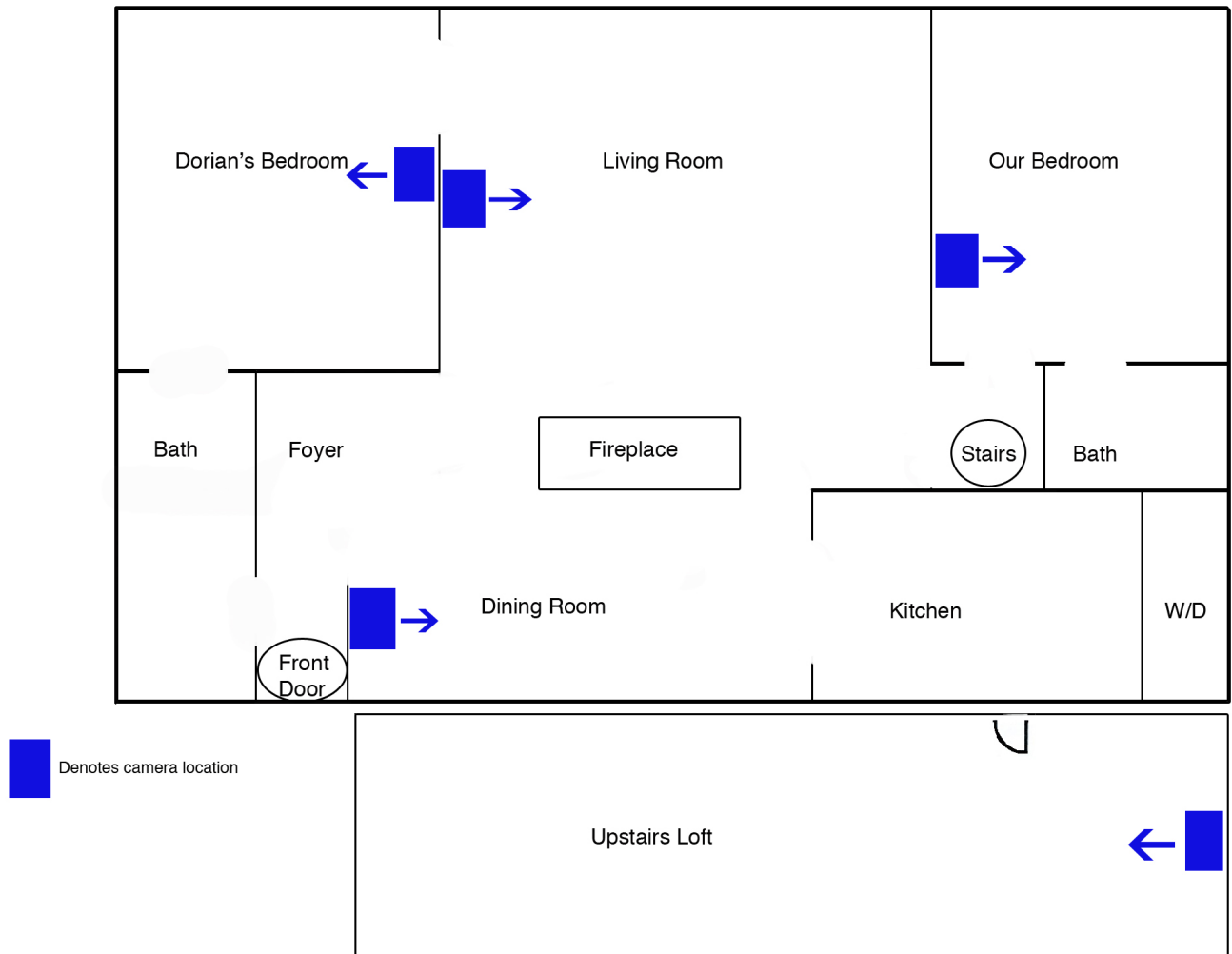


Figure 2 Floorplan of home and location of cameras

For example, in the living room, the couch at the center of the room is where the room's activity occurs and, therefore, it is the center of the photographs. Likewise, in the bedrooms, each camera focuses on the beds. The kitchen has the dining room table as the main focus,

while the loft has the computer. In both the living room and bedrooms, my family faces the cameras, creating a pseudo-interaction with the viewer.

The cameras were manually set for shutter priority at f11 throughout the ninety-one days, which allowed the cameras to keep a sharp focus, but the cameras themselves adjusted for the exposure for every image taken. This allowed a consistently correct exposure. Furthermore, the cameras were installed on shelves that helped prohibit movement, and were attached to interval meters. These devices allowed the cameras to be set up to take pictures on a regular schedule of twenty-four hours daily, every fifteen minutes. Ninety-six photographs were made, per camera every day. That is four times an hour, resulting in almost five hundred photos daily. On a few occasions, a camera in one room would have its batteries die, or malfunction. These spaces were replaced with black frames, to account for these missing moments, and to keep the other cameras synced. A total of 8,572 photographs were taken per room, for a grand total of 34,288 photographs.

Once retrieved from the cameras the images were compiled into one video per room, creating a timelapse of the every room for the duration of the recording. Moving at one frame per second, each video of each room's ninety-one days lasts for two hours, twenty two minutes, and fifty seconds. No images are deleted. This visual archive creates a comprehensive view of the rooms' activities, an around-the-clock document of our domestic space over the time. A narrative evolves through the natural progression of the days, as day turns to night and night to day. These environmental rhythms, coupled with our domestic routine, create a visual track that narrates our lives as creatures of habit.

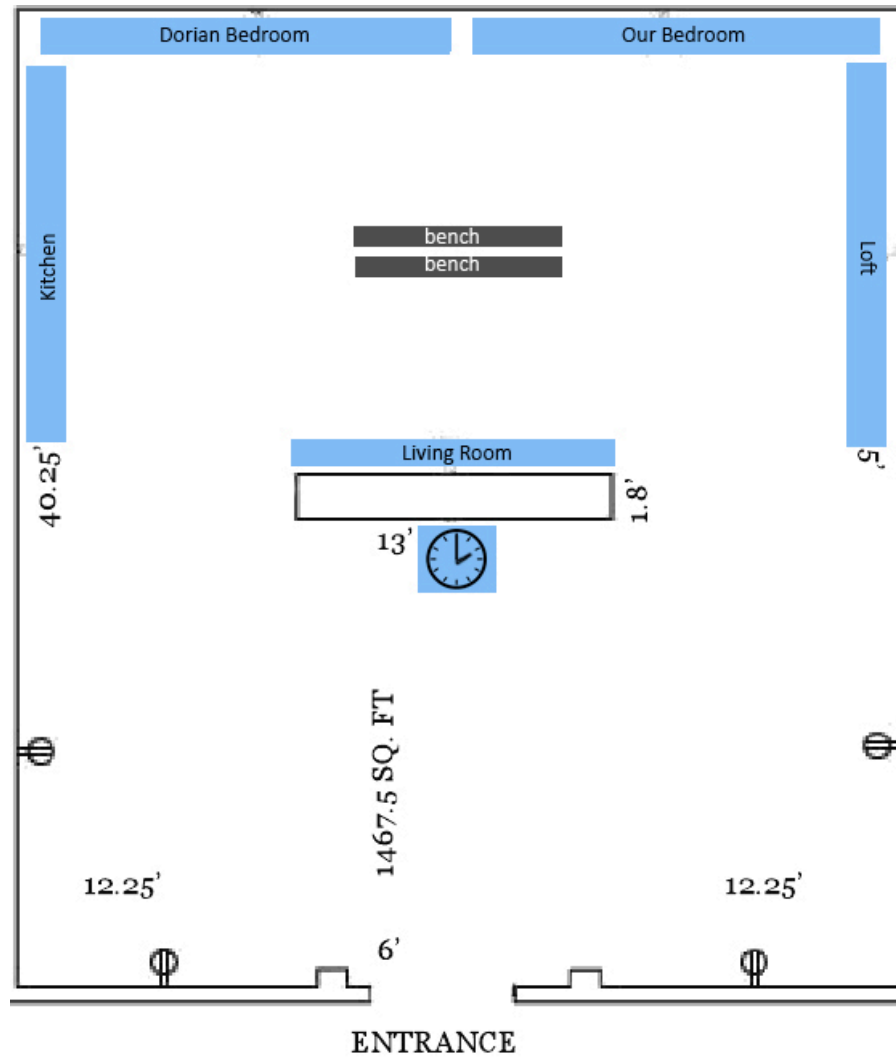


Figure 3 Layout of gallery space and video locations

The gallery installation is detailed in Figure 3 above. A large clock hangs on the partition wall of the gallery entrance, the exact clock featured in the Living Room video. Walking towards the back of the gallery, the viewer experiences the full installation, which is mounted as a pseudo-home environment. The five videos are projected large scale at approximately nine feet tall and thirteen feet wide, allowing the rooms to be life size in relation to the viewer, who is invited to sit on benches in the center of the installation. The videos were situated in relationship

with the other, creating an axis where each video was across from another. This installation design underscores the concept of public and private. The public and open entrance to the gallery transitions past the partition wall, marking the back of the gallery as a private space. The gallery is dark and silent with the exception of the subtle soundtrack of a clock ticking. The audio moves in harmony with the images, changing every second as it punctuates the space with its rhythmical tick tock.



Figure 4

Installation photograph, entryway



Figure 5 Installation photograph, left side



Figure 6 Installation photograph, right side

3 REGARDING PRIVACY

The concept of voyeurism is integral to this work. The term comes from the French *voyeur*, "one who looks" ¹. "Voyeurism" is classically defined as, "the sexual interest in or practice of spying on people engaged in intimate behaviors, such as undressing, sexual activity, or other actions usually considered to be of a private nature" ². However, in today's society the concept of voyeurism has evolved, especially in popular culture. Reality television is a prime example of voyeurism, where viewers, "the voyeur", are granted an intimate interaction with a group or individual, from the privacy of their home. This experience is replicated in *91 Days*.

A contradiction in relation to the typical notion of voyeurism is how the work is being watched. Usually voyeurism entails someone's privacy being exposed, while the voyeur is still private, watching. In this installation, the viewer or supposed "voyeur" is no longer watching from the safety and own privacy of their own home or computer. They are watching private moments being broadcast in a public sphere, where others may be watching them. Furthermore, the spatial set-up of the installation in both my home and the gallery create a pseudo-relationship between the viewer and the viewed. The viewer looks at the images from the camera's perspective and experiences being inside the life-size videos as their shadows are projected onto the installation walls.

The popularity of voyeurism has been a constant, ever since "Peeping Tom" the tailor dared to gaze at Lady Godiva. Television and especially movies also create a sense of voyeurism,

¹ Hirschfeld, M. *Sexual anomalies and perversions: Physical and psychological development, diagnosis and treatment* (new and revised edition). London: Encyclopaedic Press, 1938.

² Ibid

watching lives and stories unfold without ever having interaction with the characters. Roger Ebert wrote about the movies, “The movies make us into voyeurs. We sit in the dark, watching other people’s lives. It is the bargain cinema strikes with us, although most films are too well-behaved to mention it”³. *91 Days* imitates this movie-like atmosphere, in the darkened gallery, where viewers can sit and watch the story unfold on giant screens.

Voyeurism’s popularity however, has increased with the advent of the Internet. *91 Days* has much in common with the mid-1990s/early 2000s Internet phenomenon known as camgirls. Camgirls is a term for women who use webcams to broadcast themselves on the Internet, streaming still images to anyone who logs on, usually at the rate of one frame every five minutes. The original and most popular cam-girl site was JenniCam.com, run by Jennifer Ringley.

Heralded as the original cam girl, Ringley, for seven years starting in 1996, showed viewers her entire life, refreshed every five minutes. Work, school, relationships, even affairs with another cam girl’s boyfriend, were all captured and shared via her website. Often labeled an exhibitionist, although she only broadcast her ordinary daily life, Jennifer Ringley said an interview with ABC News, that she wanted to “show people that what we see on TV-people with perfect hair, perfect friends, perfect lives-is not reality. I’m reality”⁴. This is very much in the vein of *91 Days*, which disrupts the notion of attainable perfection that pervades the idea of

³ Calvert, Clay. *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000.

⁴ Senft, Theresa M. *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.

family. However, where Ringley was the only one being recorded, I have been recording my family's life.

Surveillance in relation to privacy is also at play in *91 Days*. Surveillance is characterized by the close observation of person or group, the act of observing or the condition of being observed⁵. I am interested in the ever-increasing publicization of private moments with reality television, Facebook, Twitter, which I consider self-surveillance, and, concurrently, the government's use of electronic and cyber surveillance. Conversely, while the commoditized broadcasting of intimate details and lives is accepted, even welcomed, the government's constitutes an invasion. Government surveillance reeks of Big Brother-ness, and the implicit understanding that everything you do can and will be watched. My work functions as a hybridization of these elements. While my home was essentially under self-imposed surveillance for ninety-one days, to be shared with the public, I was not in control of what was captured.

In regards to this idea of surveillance and control, I am indebted to English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham who, in the late eighteenth century invented the concept of the Panopticon, displayed in Figures 6 and 7. The Panopticon was a building, a prison, designed for inspection, or surveillance for inmates of the prison⁶. The structure of the Panopticon revolved around a central station, which was used to watch the inmates, who surrounded the perimeter. This surveillance set up enabled them to be watched at any time, or all the time. For those ninety-one days, our home functioned as a makeshift Panopticon, with our family being watched at all times.

⁵ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th ed., s.v. "surveillance". Houghton Mifflin Company. 2009.

⁶ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish*. New York: Vintage books, Random House, 1995.

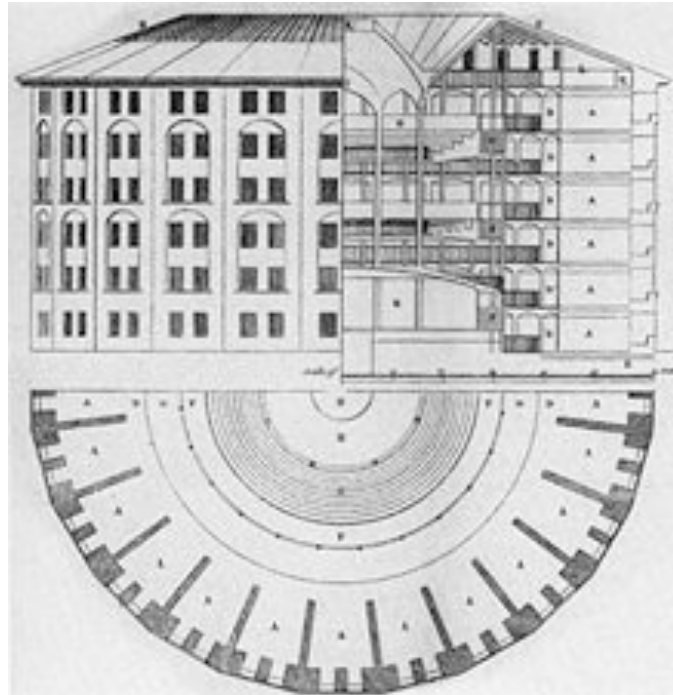


Figure 7

Panopticon blueprint by Jeremy Bentham, 1791

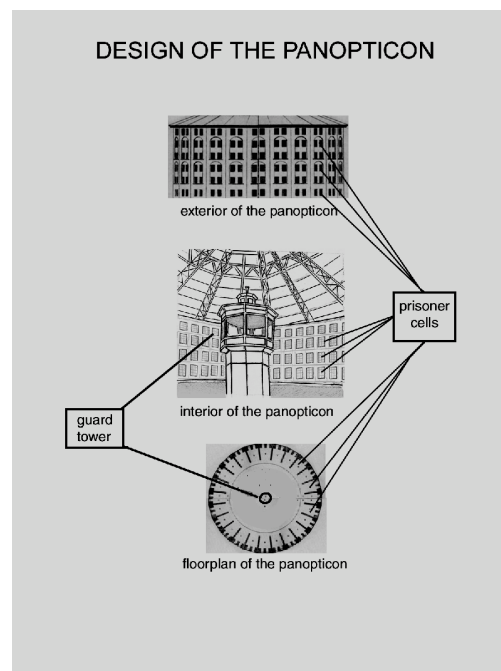


Figure 8

Design of the Panopticon

4 REGARDING FAMILY

By invading my own, and my family's privacy, I challenge the stereotypical family photography that largely showcases the typical important moments, such as birthdays, and the ideal family, full of smiles and seemingly perfect. This is the public face of the family. I am interested more in the imperfect, the moments not desired for documentation, the embarrassing and the mundane, the private. This references my point of self-representation in relation to the family album. Consider the generic family that wants to be viewed in the traditional light. The photographs they have constitute the way they desire themselves to be looked upon, and the rest are discarded. The same concept applies for social media websites, except that we are now dealing with the individual. That individual can expose as much as they want, and can cultivate the personality they desire. In effect, one can recreate their idealized self online.

This agency is even more apparent and important in regards to the family portrait, especially in relation to social media. The family album, which was once a private item, belonged in the home and was not generally accessed by acquaintances. The perusal of these images commonly involved a gathering of family and close friends where stories were told, nostalgia and memories rekindled. However today these images are often stored in cyber albums and shared with hundreds of Facebook "friends". Photographs can be uploaded immediately, often with captions such as "Great time with the family at the beach", etc, all referencing how happy a family is at that moment. It is important to state that I do not invalidate these photographs, however I am interested in the other side of family, the side that is not often get chronicled or acknowledged. I am greatly influenced and inspired by many contemporary photographers who

photograph their families, such as Tina Barney, Tierney Gearon, Larry Sultan, and Chris Verene. These artists all engage with the complexities of familial life, often exposing darker aspects.

My work captures my family in every circumstance, dictated by the mechanics of the camera, not by an individual subjective perspective. Sometimes there is a happy family, where the man and woman play with the child- she cooks, they eat dinner together. However, more often the family members are largely alone - the woman sleeps all day, the man plays video games, and the child watches too much television.

I must admit that this project, and a significant amount of my previous work delve into my personal fears of not being “good enough”. The ideal family is not something I have ever experienced in my own personal life, but it is still something toward which I strive, regardless of the abundance of sociological research that proves the typical family is not much more than myth. As Deborah Chambers, a sociologist specializing in family writes, “ the modern nuclear does exist and is flourishing as an ideal: as a symbol, discourse, and powerful myth within the collective imagination”⁷. The stereotypical family photographs and media representations of this traditional view of family only serve to strengthen the myth, and create a sense of inadequacy in those who do not meet the ideal.

This assumed inadequacy is relevant to an earlier series of photographs I made focused on single mothers as its subject. I wanted to make images that depicted a different reality than the one that is so often in the media. Those images of broken homes, consisting of struggling, promiscuous mothers and badly behaved children, living from government aid and taking advantage of it were largely surreal to my own personal experiences. The women I photographed

⁷ Chambers, Deborah. *Representing the Family*. London: SAGE Publications, 2001.

were thriving, excelling while being the sole parent, and were from a diverse set of backgrounds. This is not to say there were not moments of chaos, as captured in Figure 7. In making these photographs, I was meeting mothers and their children, and staying with them for several hours, taking hundreds of photographs, as I lurked in the corner. Ultimately I selected only one image per family to be viewed as their interviews were played aloud. However, I feel the work was unsuccessful, in the sense that it barely scratched at the surface. These families could not be summed up in a single image.



Figure 9

Julie, 2009



Figure 10

Gretel, 2009

Figure 11

Compilation of images from *Family Photographs*, 2010

In *Family Photographs*, a body of work following the single mothers project, I photographed the members of my family: my parents, my grandparents, my brother, my son, and my partner (Figure 8). The solitary portraits have minimal facial expression, which comments on the genre of family photography where members present themselves smiling for the camera. I was trying to work through and get to what was “really” my family by asking my family to blankly stare at the camera. Again, I found disappointment with this body of work, as I moved further away from the single image and from subjective photography as seen from my own eyes.

This idea of “real family” underlines the intent of *91 Days* in which I reconcile the ideal with reality. For three months, the cameras were always there, watching my family. I grew to resent them and counted down the days until they would come down. I tried not to let them affect my behavior, but they felt malicious and aggressive. I would be playing with my son, leave for a moment, and then the shutters would go off. There would be no evidence to anyone but my son and I that we had interacted. This is an inherent contradiction in the work. I must acknowledge that I am at once challenging the images of the happy, perfect family. However I simultaneously am disappointed and embarrassed that I do not fit into this category. While I am trying to rectify the disparity between image and reality, I feel like my reality of home life was compromised by the images. The desire and anxiety to reinforce the mythologized ideal of family is constant. Regardless, I believe the representation of my home life is largely accurate, unflattering or not.

This idea of accuracy was already of interest to me as a child and adolescent. When I was young, I did not smile for photographs. A sullen and miserable child, I can recall arguments

over this. However, my parents were determined for my family to have an artifact and misremember me as happy. Even as a child, I understood this and acknowledged this, and was uninterested in pretending. Marianne Hirsch, a researcher in the field of family photography, writes of family images, “Family photos are cherished documents that chronicle intimate relationships and experience. Yet what do these images convey, perhaps subconsciously? They tend to follow rigid conventions which support dominant familial myths and ideologies, representing the family quite uniformly as happy, stable, and unchanging”⁸.

Marianne Hirsch also developed the concept for the familial gaze as it applies to photographs and representations of the family. According to Hirsch, family portraits are images of a particular kind, evoking specifically relational forms of reading. Recognizing an image as familial, “elicits a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative”⁹. This is evident in the viewing of *91 Days*, as viewers compare this to their own family and familial experiences, turning the gaze inward onto themselves.

The family album usually acknowledges a specific time period or occasion - Easter, Christmas, family vacations, etc. I was gifted a set of albums for when my son was a newborn at age one, age one to two, two to three, and three to four. I have never used them or the one for “Angel’s First Birthday”. I propose *91 Days* is my family album, encompassing a random set of days and no special occasions. These images, while of family, do not evoke the “family album” that is expected, however I believe they convey a more accurate and honest family representation.

⁸ Hirsch, Marianne. *The Familial Gaze*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 1999.

⁹ Ibid

5 CONCLUSION

The concept of family cannot be summed up with a single definition, or photograph. The dualistic nature of the family is simultaneously represented in both private and public social spheres. The word family functions not only as a noun, but also as a verb. Family does not simply exist, it is in flux, happening, transitioning, always. *91 Days* was created in response to the staggering amount of imagery that floods the genre of family photography, which largely emphasizes the desire to be the ideal family. By chronicling and sharing the mundane daily existence of my family and home, I emphasize the importance of the other moments that do not classically define and represent family. There is something profound to be discovered in these ordinary moments.

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